Homeland after Eighteen Years

(A 48-hour Travelogue in Kashmir)



K L Chowdhury

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By the Same Author

Of Gods, Men and Militants - 2000

A Thousand-petalled Garland and other poems - 2003

The Enchanting World of Infants - 2008

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To Kashmir, the Homeland that was

I am grateful to Rauf for his insightful inputs while driving me to different places. With young people like him, there still is hope for Kashmir.

For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.

(Theodor Adorno)

Introduction

I was invited to Srinagar to receive the 'Lifetime Award for the Best Book in English' for my anthology, Enchanting World of Infants. I would be going there after eighteen years. That is a long time, nearly a generation. It was a hard decision on many counts.

First, going back just for a brief visit, after having been violently thrown out, is a painful proposition; when all you expect to witness is the decay and death of the values you cherished and the eclipse of the plurality and syncretism that Kashmir boasted of to the rest of the world. However, I would go with an open mind.

Second, I had declined previous invitations to visit Kashmir as a participant in inter-faith dialogues, because of the threat perception to my life for having endeavored to expose the true face of terrorism that went under the charade of Azadi, and for championing the rights of Kashmiri Pandits to return to Kashmir. Over the years, even as terrorism has beaten a retreat for some time and threats to life receded, there has been a further consolidation of aggressive Islam in Kashmir, and of a relentless trend to cultural and religious exclusivity by the systematic suppression and extirpation of other religious communities. How would I face the changed milieu?

Third, my mother with many disabilities was bedridden after a recent hip fracture. She called for a round-the-clock attention. My absence, even for a short time, would put Leela, my wife, to great strain.

Fourth, the award ceremony on 4 October was under a thick cloud. In the aftermath of the fierce controversy over Shri Amarnath Yatra (the Hindu pilgrimage to the holy cave), which had tragically polarized society across a religious and regional divide and caused hysteria of protests and processions, strikes and shut-downs, mayhem and violence lasting several months, the Muslim separatists had given a "Lal Chowk Challo" call for Monday, 6 October. Several thousand people were expected to participate in the long march to the historic Lal Chowk in Srinagar. This was purported to be a demonstration of mass support for Azadi and an act of defiance against the State administration and the Republic of India. Anything was possible under the circumstances - pre-emptive arrests, cancellation of all important events, curfew, violence, etc.

Yet, the heart longed for Kashmir, for just one glimpse of her. The restless soul not only sought solace in her lap but also yearned to comfort her for the hurt and humiliation heaped on her. Here was the opportunity I would fain grab with both my hands, for time was ticking away and who knew what the future had to offer?

I had vowed that if I ever returned to Srinagar, my first port of call would be the Siva temple on top the Shankaracharya hill. Since 1983, when I moved into my own house in Inidra Nagar, I would climb the hill to the temple almost every morning till the day we were forced out of Kashmir. It had always been an invigorating and soul-stirring experience that I sorely missed in exile. There was also a burning desire to visit Rajveri Kadal, where I was born, and to walk the lanes where I had spent my childhood.

Now was the call!

Rauf, the son of my deceased friend, would take me around during my 2-day stay. How much ground would we be able to cover under the circumstances was beyond any guesswork. But, we would give it our best shot. It was going to be a bird's eye view, after all.

Here is how it happened.

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The Debate

There is a debate in the family
whether I should travel to Srinagar
to receive the award in person
or ask them to send it to me
after the scheduled function.

Kashmir has never left my thoughts
ever since I left her, 18 years back.
Every night when I go to bed,
every morning when I wake up,
every time I dream a dream,
and every day when I cogitate,
I roam the lanes and by lanes
of the home where I was born,
the school where I learnt my three Rs,
and the hospital where I worked and taught.
That was my small beautiful world
that I would loathe exchange
even for paradise.

I often recall my friends in Kashmir
and remember them
beyond their religious identities,
and before the time
there was anything like 'them' and 'us'.

The pantheon of gods around Hariparbat
that I frequented as a boy,
the lakes Dal and Manasbal
where I often rowed with my spouse,
and the hills and mountains
that I climbed with my children,
have defined my memories in exile.
I would die to be there again
for once,
if only once.

But there are fears and doubts.
Eighteen years is a long time,
a new generation has taken birth
and a generation passed away,
and much has changed
since we were forced from Kashmir –
the paradigms and perceptions,
the human relationships,
the tactic and rhetoric,
the political affiliations,
the sub-continental equations.

More importantly,
would I be safe from the militants
even if the threat perceptions
are now said to be remote?
Was I not on top of their hit list
for voicing my thoughts
against their heinous crimes?

Leela is supportive but concerned:
"You never trust a desperado
out to prove a point;
you could be their best bet,
an easy target."

And my siblings and children
settled in many continents
are even more apprehensive,
for distance magnifies threat perceptions,
and lends an exceptional poignancy
to feelings of concern
for your kin.

Even as I am convinced
that I am remote from their calculations,
as remote as a thought in the mind of the dead,
yet, a doubt lingers in my mind:
If some militant got it into his head
to shoot me down
how will I face my mother and spouse,
how will I answer my children?
Am I being selfish?
Am I too covetous for the award?

And finally, but not the least,
my mother's state of health is a concern;
would my wife be able to cope alone
with a bed-ridden ninety-year old,
on the edge of oblivion?

I wished the ceremony were deferred
and held in Jammu rather than Srinagar,
since the dissidents are hell bent
on the proposed march to Lal Chowk
on Monday, the 6th of October.

Am I flying into the eye of a storm?
Am I flying into danger?

To receive an award in person
is an honorable proposition;
stronger is the urge for a reunion
with people and places
where I spent all my childhood and prime,
and my middle years till I was forty-nine;
where my forefathers lived and died,
where my soul doth reside.

Besides, what a season to visit the valley,
to see her again in autumnal glory –
the splendour of the flaming Chinars,
the sparkling springs and placid lakes,
the roses, marigolds and chrysanthemums,
the blue skies and golden sunsets.

No, there is nothing to stop me,
for it does seem
that the award is just an excuse
thrown my way by providence
to fulfill my intense longing
for a rendezvous with the valley.

Day One

Friday, 3 October 2008

On Board Jet Airways, Jammu- Srinagar

How come I feel so composed and calm
when my heart should be in a flutter
to hug my homeland in half an hour?

Having waited18 years, 5 months and 3 days
where is the thrill of a lover
when the hour of reunion is finally here?

I have pined long years of separation;
why are my emotions so dumb and deprived
when the time has finally arrived?

I look out from the window -
the snowy ranges are out of sight
and ominous clouds of dissent and anger
hover over the valley of Kashmir.
There is a strange mismatch
between the tranquility in my mind
and the turbulence in the air.

I look inside the plane -
few passengers, fewer visitors,
when they should have been swarming
in this season of song and dance,
of mellowing fruit and harvest,
of Kashmir at her fiery best.

As the time arrives, I look out again
for an aerial peek at Mother Kashmir
before I land and tightly hug her.

Soon, we loose height, to find in view
rows of hutments I had never seen,
in various shades of grey and green.
They are the barracks, I am told,
for the soldiers defending the airport.

Out of the plane, it is 33 Celsius.
It is dull, it is hot, it is sultry
and the haze in the atmosphere
hides the mountains in the periphery.

The airport has gone international
and the tarmac could be anywhere -
Delhi, Dublin or Delaware -
not the Srinagar airport
that had always been so friendly and familiar.

But, for now, I feel like a stranger,
a mere nobody.
There is not one familiar face
in the crowd of passengers,
nor in the officials,
who look at me in passing
with a bored yawn
from behind the counters.
Pray, who am I?
What brings me here?

There is still no feeling inside me
of that moment of eternity
when one touches the feet of Mother
after a long absence from her.
Am I moving in a dream?
Or, is it not my homeland
but a different place altogether?

Welcome

Suddenly I am somebody
when a Sikh driver and a Muslim official
of the J&K State Academy
of Arts, Culture and Languages,
waiting at the gate to receive me,
ask if I am Dr. Chowdhury.

My baggage is hustled into a van
as they receive another awardee
who has traveled in the same plane,
and yet another, unknown to me?

"Welcome to Paradise"
reads a signboard on a street pole
as we drive outside the airport.
A picture of Habba Khatoon,
with a popular couplet from her,
hangs from another pole;
and from yet another
a rather outlandish one of Lalla Ded,
that brings to mind her haunting vaakh:
"My precept gave me a lone mantra,
asking me to withdraw from outside
and to delve deep within.
That became my goal and gospel
and I started dancing nude,
without the worldly trappings."

Yes, if we desire salvation
from the tragedy that besets our land
we need Lalla's divine vision
to tread the path of self-introspection
and cast off the baggage of ignorance.

I see a short stretch of a new driveway
with young Chinars in the divider,
and a new generation of poplars on the sides,
as old as my absence from here.

As we go down the airport plateau
there is no evidence of fall yet,
but dull grey and green leaves in decay,
while new constructions come into view
where paddy fields once held sway –
private residences built in style,
shopping malls flowing over the pavements,
new mosques in green with crescents,
their minaret's spiking the sky,
and school buildings
rising many floors high.
What a mix of education and religion!

O, where are the fiery Chinars of October,
where the bracing breeze,
and where the sweet nip in the air?
Am I too early in the month here?

The streets are rather sparse with people-
some in skullcaps, long shirts and shalwars,
others bearded, chatting on the shops.
Because it is Friday afternoon,
the driver explains,
people are resting after the prayer.
It also happens to be the third Eid
(the hangover lasts a full week here);
and the call by the Hurriyat
(that conglomerate of many-hued separatists),
for Monday march to Lal Chowk
has cast a pall of fear in the air.

First Glimpse of the Lord

Gone are the farmlands and fields,
gone the pastures and rural scenes.
Shops with big billboards
line the streets on either side,
while fences, strong and high,
insulate the private lots
from the evil-eye.

Our first halt is at Lal Mandi,
the office of the Academy,
where the driver stops
to report the arrival of the awardees.

I come out of the van, and,
what an arresting sight!
Mountain ranges in the background
and beloved Shankaracharya right in front,
towering tall over this ancient city
in its breathtaking profundity!
The heart gives a loud thud
for that joyous climb up the hill -
my everyday rendezvous
before our forced exodus.

My salutations to you, Siva;
you are my first port of call
and I am here to fulfill my vow
that if I ever returned to the valley,
to you would I make my first bow.

Vitasta

I look on my left at the Vitasta
that has meandered merrily
from the dawn of history,
and, on her sacred shores,
reared generations of its progeny.

Alas, what offers the sight
is a lazy, almost stagnant stream,
duckweed and refuse,
and an occasional animal carcass,
floating on her sullied surface.

There is no evidence, whatever,
of her youthful voluptuous sway
but bare banks sloping up to the bund,
and the river in deep depression,
bemoaning the valley's transformation.

We cross a new bridge across the river,
unspectacular and architecturally poor,
that supplants the zero bridge just near,
and blights the beauty of the bund here.
We turn right soon after
and move into a high security zone -
the Government Guest House,
the Stadium, and the Amarsingh Club -
fortified by a wire-mesh fence,
and gun- wielding personnel on guard.

Cricket

Here in this dilapidated stadium,
young boys in white shirts and trousers,
absorbed in the game of willow,
strike a familiar secular scene,
quite different from the much feared picture
of youth brandishing grenades and guns
that one hears about Kashmir.

But was cricket just a sporting game ever
in our religiously charged atmosphere?
Were we not always at the receiving end
of the fire and fury of partisan mobs
during India- Pakistan matches here?
Were we not stoned and sworn at
if India happened to win a match,
and taunted, teased and pushed
for the ignominy of her defeat?
Were we not forced to join their revelry
when India lost,
and in their mourning
in her victory?
Did we have the right to betray or express
our opinions and sentiments freely?

Was it not in this cricket stadium,
somewhere in the nineteen eighties,
when, to the utter disbelief of the Caribbean's,
the spectators gave them a standing ovation,
cheering every run they scored,
while hooting the Indian players down,
and rejoicing at the fall of their wickets,
in the first and only cricket international
ever played in Srinagar?

That day, the crowds ran amuck,
renting the skies with their slogans,
waving green flags with crescents,
pelting stones at the Indian fielders,
writing an epitaph for cricket here.
Verily, the boys fancied the Kalashnikov
over the famously indigenous willow.

Are we witnessing a change of heart now?
Are the boys fed up with the gun
and wanting to return to some fun?

Chinars

If they have escaped the axe
of the militant and the greedy politician,
it is only here in this high security zone
on the right bank of the river.
Elsewhere, the Chinars are getting extinct
like the indigenous Kashmiri Pandit.

Yes, the Chinars here stand lofty as ever,
a profound feature of the valley's grandeur,
as ancient and sacred as one can remember,
a recurring subject of poetic metaphor,
the sentinels of the ethos of Kashmir.

But, to my utter dismay,
not a leaf has changed color till date,
the colors I had come to see -
golden, fiery red and rusty -
that would leap to the sky like flames,
and help dispel
the dull, dreary and dismal mood
that hangs heavy on the valley.

I miss the evocative autumnal scenes
of mounds of fallen leaves,
that would dot every street and lane
in village, town and city.
I miss the familiar smell
of spirals of smoke
that went up lazily
when the mounds smoldered slowly
and turned to soft charcoal
for use in the kangri -
that inimitable, invariable companion
which warms the heart and bosom
of every Kashmiri.

Inside the Circuit House

Here is where state guests are lodged
and I remember having once been here
to have a look at a Central Minister
who fell sick while on a holiday
but lost his even sicker temper
because it took me time to reach here.

I am conducted to a room,
a rather bleakish place,
cluttered with furniture,
but the walls bare,
the door lock dysfunctional,
the bed sheets discolored from disuse,
the faucets leaking in the bathroom
and a miniscule bar of soap
that keeps slipping through the fingers.

In the dinning room (for a cup of tea),
poorly lighted and rather dingy,
there is a breath of recognition
in the two waiters
who greet me smilingly.

They cannot be more than twenty
and I would not know them
nor would they know me,
yet there strikes a note of familiarity
beyond the pale of understanding,
like acquaintances from faraway times,
like old friends or relations,
like a father meeting his separated sons.

They are like the young Chinars that I saw
along the driveway from the airport,
a new generation, to me unknown,
strangers, yet so much like my own.

I never experienced that *déjà vu*
in my eighteen years of wanderings
away from my home in the valley.
Pray, what is the common chord
that strikes between them and me?
Why this feeling out of the ordinary?

Is this what defined Kashmiriyat,
that sprang from a unique harmony
between the Pandits and the Muslims -
a fellow feeling that had survived
down many a century,
till it took a beating from the gun
and changed the human equation?

Yet, all may not be lost,
for it seems to me
that the feeling still survives
somewhere deep in the Kashmiri psyche.
Otherwise how does one explain
this warm feeling in my heart?
Or is it just an illusion,
a wishful thinking,
a make-believe situation?

Is it that I am welcome here
only as long as I am a guest
and not when I wish to return
to my homeland for good?

There is an adage in Kashmiri:
Strong are the bonds of blood
that, like chains of gold,
do not easily break.
How I wish it were true
for every human relationship
beyond religious and political divide,
beyond time, place and age.

A Welcome Hug

Rauf is the son of my deceased friend,
my one surviving link with the valley
since I was forced to flee.
He arrives soon after
and hugs me tightly,
a long and welcome hug
(we had met only a month earlier
when he was in Jammu on official duty).
Part of the hug is certainly his own
but a larger share is from the valley
(he did not have to tell me).

"I am here to drive you around,"
Rauf tells me,
"that you may convince yourself
that militancy has run its course
and it is time for you to return."

"But," I ask him, as I get on his car,
"the strikes and hartals go on,
the protests marches never cease,
the bombs blast, the guns fire,
and there is violence in the air?"

"Yes, a few incidents here and there
have become a part of our culture;
but, it will pass, I am sure,
for the common man is fed up
with the cries for Jihad and Azadi,
and craves for peace and harmony,"
rues he.
"People have seen through the militants,
and the leaders who stoke their passions.
Be it the subversives and separatists,
be it the politicians and the ideologues,
they all have their axe to grind;
they give a damn for the common man
who is dragged into this
for no fault of his."

Shankaracharya

We start with the first call of duty
and drive up the Mt. Shankaracharya,
to the temple,
after passing through the security
at the foothill.

Lame foot on the accelerator
(he contracted polio in infancy
but fought the handicap bravely
not unlike his noble father,
who battled crippling spondylitis
till his unfortunate demise at fifty),
he drives almost recklessly,
negotiating the curves fast,
and faster, as we climb the steep road,
offering a kaleidoscopic view of lake Dal
through the thick jungle.

He speaks with passion, without a pause,
mourning the slow death of the lake,
through encroachments by predators -
humans who claim it from the periphery,
and killer weeds that grab it from within.

He is on a high,
almost intoxicated with joy
for showing me around,
in his own car
(his father died a pauper
and left nothing behind
except a fair name and good will).

"Do you watch TV?"
he asks me suddenly,
Not really, I reply,
except for a few channels –
BBC, Animal Planet and Discovery.
"What about Peace Channel?
It is quite enlightening,
Dr. Zakir's discussions, especially," says he.
"I heard that name somewhere," I reply.
"A great exponent of religions,
he traces them all to Abraham,
whom the Jews acknowledge
and the Muslims, and the Christians too.
Jews and Muslims and Christians
are children of Abraham, he says,
and, so are the Hindus, he believes."
"Yes, we are children of the same God," I reply.
"The word Brahma
is a Hindu derivation from Abraham.
Don't you agree?" asks he.

I just smile
for I wonder if he would accept
that Brahma is a great concept,
that Brahma has been there much before
any of the religions he named,
that Brahma and Creation go together.
Yet, was it not gratifying -
a Muslim youngster wanting to strike
a common thread between religions?

After a dizzying drive
a thousand feet up from the base
we come to a halt at the top of the hill,
and I ask Rauf to stay behind
sparing him the long flight of stairs
to the temple.

Even as I read on a notice board,
'No cameras allowed beyond this point,'
from a strange impulse,
I ask the sentry on duty
to let me carry the camera with me.
But, my argument fails to convince
for he has orders to carry out,
he tells me almost apologetically.

Not the least dismayed,
I almost run up the stone stairs,
hundred odd steps to the end,
and on to the plateau
now almost shrunk to a small courtyard,
what with structures that have come up,
obliterating the view of the world
that we would enjoy in days of yore.

Army shacks, tents and a lavatory
blight this hallowed patch of hill,
and a wire-mesh fence all round
has closed the trekking routes,
that I would often traverse -
from the north and from the south,
from the east and from the west.

The only redeeming feature
is a small Chinar of my times
now grown to a strapping youth,
adorning this small plateau here.

Just as I start to climb
the short flight of steep steps
to the sanctum sanctorum
I hear a voice from behind
"Namaskar, Doctor Sahib,"
and I turn around
to find a smiling face
that I cannot place.

"I have been your patient, sir,
Maharaj Kishen is my name.
What a delight to see you here;
and if I may dare,
it will be a great honor
to serve you a cup of tea
after your audience with the deity."

Oh that is so gracious of him,
but, rather than a cup of tea,
could he arrange to get my camera
through the security,
I ask him unabashedly?

Who is he, I wonder?
What is he doing here?
Why did I ask him a favour?
Did I put him in some discomfiture?
But, before I could stop him
and find an answer
he dashed away in a hurry
with a gesture that implied
he would not leave it untried.

The Audience

Oh how I have cherished this moment,
imagined it again and again,
and dreamt it every night,
to be face to face with you,
if only once,
my Siva,
my lord!

For, neither your beautiful visage
nor my faith in you
dimmed even a bit
in the course of time;
the flame of my devotion
unwavering in the storms of exile.

Oh, how those large red-chocolate ovals,
standing out to shine ever bright
against the greenish-grey background
of this sanctified granite rock,
kept my faith alive
these lonesome years!

Oh, how I always marveled
at the Master Artist
who mixed those colors
and chiseled that shape!
For, never was a stone as sacred to me,
never a lingam inspired such divinity,
never an image, icon or deity
raised such visions of eternity.

Now, when I find you again,
in flesh and blood,
and the eternal spirit of divinity
that has enthused millions like me,
my hands tremble
as they move to feel you –
your electrifying cool balmy touch
that has been denied me
in the hot arid plains
for eighteen long summers.

Come, let us hug each other
in a mighty long and lingering embrace
to fill the void of lost years,
so I take a good measure of you
as you take of me.

Come, there is so much to share,
so much to speak to each other,
to unfreeze congealed memories,
to recompense the pangs of separation,
and to drink deep of your ambience,
so I take the impressions back with me
to last me till we meet again.

Come, let's make the best of what we have
for time is short,
as it always is when lovers meet.

Is it just a coincidence
that I see no one else here,
but only you and me?
Or is it again your benevolence
that you arranged a special rendezvous
on purpose?

I have come empty handed,
no pine cones to offer
that I used to pick on the way,
no flowers, no herbs,
no blandishments.
I will not waste my time
giving you a bath with milk,
massaging you with honey and ghee,
lighting a lamp and burning incense.
I have come to offer myself,
my entirety,
my essence.

An Overview

What a view from here,
that stretches beyond infinity,
a soulful view
that mattered so much to me
and my family.

If there is anything that has not changed
it is the mountains in the distance,
and the high pilgrimages nearby,
that beckoned me in days of yore –
the Hershewar, Sarshewar and Mahadev
that I scaled in my lonely climbs
up these lofty ranges.

Nor has the sky changed here,
the beautiful azure blue,
nor the languorous clouds of myriad shapes
that linger amorously on the mountains peaks
with a deep love-sickness that I have imbibed
and permeates my heart like a sweet ache.

All else has transformed –
the lake Dal,
once the city's shining jewel,
sorrowfully shrunk to a sad pool;
the tiny island, we called Nehru Park,
now a part of the larger land mass
that has been claimed from the lake;
houses and hotels dotting the landscape
where floating gardens, water lilies
and swans once held sway;
the Vitasta that meandered down the city
dancing like a beautiful belle,
now hidden in the jungle of concrete;
and Srinagar, as viewed from here,
a jumble of tinned rooftops and balconies
crowding each other out -
a stark evidence of the insatiable hunger
for land, water and space,
transforming into a tinsel town
this paradise of rivers, springs and lakes.

Encore

It was with a mixed emotion
I took leave of you, my lord,
and walked backwards
till you were out of view,
and then, turning round,
climbed down the steps fast
to where Rauf waited for me below.

But you must have laughed
when I said "Till we meet again,"
for, when I bowed before my exit,
I saw a smile on your face,
a signature smile that you give
when you are at your benevolent best.

Lo, on the last but one rung,
I find Mahraj Krishen again,
(my camera in his pocket),
signing me to retrace my steps
all the way up,
for an encore.

He makes light of my apology
for having pushed him
to do a wrong thing.
How can it be wrong for a devotee
to want to capture the images of the lord,
he asks me.

So here I am again,
to ask your pardon
for this innocent transgression
that only you make happen.

I take shots from all your sides,
yet, what sides am I talking of,
the perfect oval that you are?
Can anyone really capture
your formless form
in a painting, picture or sculpture?

A cup of Tea

After I have taken pictures
of the lake, the sky, the city,
appears Mahraj Krishen again
with a steaming cup of tea.

The temple priest joins soon after
pleading with me
to give him a quick look
for he has been ailing for long
from some mysterious illness
that gives him fever and weakness.

He calls it divine intervention
that Siva called me on purpose here,
for it was only a day earlier
that he had been counseled
to take the bus to Jammu
in order to consult me there!

Isn't that providential, my lord;
isn't that quite like you?
Or, are we humans too credulous
to make so much
of mere coincidences?

But even statistics fail to explain
so many happenstances together,
for, not only do you earn me the award
and contrive my long-cherished visit to you,
not only do you arrange the ceremony here
against all the odds in this vicious atmosphere,
not only do you arrange me the camera
that is not allowed to anybody,
but, you also get the physician
to an ailing patient
right to his door,
sparing him an arduous journey.

As I think about it,
and endeavor to tread delicately
the thin line between science and spirituality,
I know, you must be laughing again
at my childlike impetuosity.

Dal Lake

Down the driveway
and along the boulevard
we are on the shoreline
of lake Dal.
But, what meets the eye
is a dismal picture.
There is not a visitor in evidence,
when tourists should have been flocking here;
not a boat sailing on the water,
when the gentle cadence of the oars
pulling the spring shikaras
should have been music to the ears.

O where is Abdullah,
who would row me for hours
on the placid waters
in his 'Prince of Lake',
and gift me the best of nadru
harvested from the lake's bosom?
That crunchy feel of the lotus root,
the invariable dish in our home,
still lingers in my mouth
after nearly two decades.

The lake Dal is shrunken and sad,
her waters turbid green,
duckweed floating on the surface,
red algae that nourish on human excreta
choking it from within.
She is dying, this fair maiden -
a sign of the ominous times we live in!

Ever since I remember,
the State Government has been floating
sham projects and schemes
under the pretext of retrieving the lake
from the jaws of the greedy grabbers
and the claws of the killer weed.
Alas, the billions that have been pouring in
from the Central Government in New Delhi,
and the international funding agencies,
have been sucked into the black hole
that the lake Dal has become.

The mandarins and ministers,
the politicians and project managers,
the high officials and the lowly workers -
one and all –
have joined in the big loot,
while the hapless lake Dal
dies a slow but certain death.

Zeishta

Along the erstwhile Palace Road,
that also leads to the Governor's house,
through a maze of security barricades,
we drive on a low hill
to a short flight of stairs
to the Zeishta temple.

I do not find the small waterfall
that welcomed you here at the entry.
Has it dried up or been diverted
to water some greedy minister's farmhouse?

What a pity that odd structures –
shops and hutments -
have come up even in this hallowed place,
blotting Paree Mahal out the view,
eating up the vast open space
where mendicants found solitude
during the day
and fairies danced at night ?

This used to be my favorite Sunday haunt,
as also the climb up this mountain
through the densest jungle I ever trekked,
rife with black bear and bramble
that I brushed with so often.

Even Zeistha, the presiding deity -
mounted in the middle of the spring,
resplendent in garish robes,
fenced around with iron grills,
crisscrossed with blinking light bulbs
of so many colours
that create an eerie ambience -
looks out of place, all askance.

Her once sparkling water
has turned dirty brown and green
from candy cakes, flowers and herbs
that the devotees toss in as offerings.
A subtle stink rises from within
forcing one to make a retreat.
O, where are the aesthetics
we often brag about,
where the sense and sensibility!

Indira Nagar

Is this Indira Nagar where I lived,
re-christened Iqbal Colony
by the fervent faithful
to whom the Hindu sounding name
was like a red rag to the bull?

It seems right in retrospect,
for now I see Muslim nameplates
on the erstwhile Hindu gates.

More guesthouses have come up here,
and more floors added to houses
that have risen up and up
filling the vacant land and air,
the sky blotted out of view,
the street choked with vehicles,
and noise, dust and smoke
spread like a pall of gloom
over this once quiet neighborhood.

I cannot recognize my house,
outflanked and dwarfed by others
that have sprung up all round.

Yes, it is just a house,
a ghost of what it used to be;
no longer the home
where my children grew up,
my father practiced law,
my mother indulged guests,
and my wife and I doctored the sick
with compassion and zest.

The garden has turned into a marsh,
stink and desultoriness ruling the roast,
the lawn taken over by wild grass,
the flowers by weeds!
O where are the roses and sunflowers;
where the marigolds and the mums
that bloomed here in wild abundance;
where the creeper and the vine,
where the poplar and the pine?

The neighbors have filled their lots,
and raised their ground levels,
their effluent gravitating into mine
turning it into a receptacle
for waste and brine.

The ground floor is dark and wet,
dampness rising to the bare walls,
and the paint peeling off everywhere.
The floors are stripped of matting,
the doors cracked and creaking,
the curtain-less windows a squeaking,
the bathrooms stained and stinking.

The living room looks sepulchral,
the kitchen fallen silent for ever.

Our bedrooms look like dingy cells,
the clinic a forgotten refuge of patients,
the thokur kuth an archeological curiosity
and the icons, idols and images of gods
gathering the dust and rust of time.

The power lines are in tatters,
the plumbing has run into rot,
the furniture and fixtures are all but gone,
gone the view of the Shankarachariya hill,
of Mahadev and the Zabarwan range,
gone too the archives and the library,
gone the paintings and the photo gallery!

What remains is just a memory.

No, this house cannot be my home,
for home is where the hearth is,
hearth is where there is warmth,
warmth is where there is life and love.
This place is lifeless, loveless and cold,
and filled with an overwhelming absence -
of the house deity,
of the inmates,
of the very soul
that makes a home.

When I started from Jammu
I asked Leela if she had any message.
"I pine for Kashmir," she said with feeling,
"Say my hi everywhere you go,"
and, as an after thought, she said,
"Kiss each brick of my home
that I so much miss."
She had literally and metaphorically
overseen this home rise brick by brick,
like the birds their nest, feather by feather.
No, I will not waste her sacred kisses
after witnessing this desecration
of her nest.

A Night at Circuit House

It feels so strange
to be sleeping a night out
in this guest house,
while my own home, just a mile away,
beckons me to its once warm bosom.

All my life, since I was born,
this will be the first night ever
that I sleep under an alien roof.

Sharing this room with a stranger
(I did not know Mohan Singh before;
he is another awardee
who writes in Hindi),
is another first-time experience.
I envy him his blessed sleep
that came to him instantly
the moment he turned off his bed light
while I kept tossing till midnight.
I swallowed a sleeping pill,
and yet could barely manage a wink,
only to be woken up soon after
by the sudden blaring of the loud speaker
that pierced through the open window
from a mosque across the river.

Thankfully, the huge Chinars
dammed the pitch a little bit,
but, at the first glow of dawn,
the kites on the Chinars took over
and, soon after,
a clutch of crows
joined the chorus.

With the first rays of the sun
the sky came to, and the river too,
and I quietly slipped out
for a long morning stroll
in the lawns of the guest house
and along the river bank,
that used to be my favorite haunt.

The subtle fragrance of the roses -
yellow, white and pink -
breezed into me
and chased weariness away,
but it were the golden marigolds,
the marigold of Kashmiri vintage,
that gladdened my heart as never before
and brought back the spirit of devotion,
for, they have always remained
an invariable article
of our religious tradition.

I picked one and tossed it in the water
as my offering to the vale of Kashmir.

Day Two

Saturday, 4 October 2008

(On a Cross-country Drive)

Rauf arrives 7 AM on the dot.
On empty stomachs, we trot off.
There is little time to lose
and long distance to traverse -
the distance of eighteen years
in just a few hours -
before the award ceremony
begins at three.

Jawaharlal Nehru College for Women

We drive along the cricket stadium
to the Residency Road,
to the famous Regal Chowk
and on to the Maulana Azad Road.

There has never been any objection
to a street, park or an institution
being named after a Muslim
in beloved Kashmir,
even it be of a non-Kashmiri
like that of the Maulana,
after whom this road is named.

But, passing by the College for Women,
I still do not see the celebrated name
of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru
on the hoarding at the gate -
a name that should have been cherished
by every Kashmiri in so many ways.
For, not only was he a son of the soil,
and the first Prime Minister of India,
but he also gave Jammu and Kashmir
her special, semi-autonomous status,
that bestowed on her
a more than equal rank in the nation.
Yet, when this College for Women
was rechristened after his name,
the violent protests did not stop
till the proposition was dropped.

O, what intolerance!
What ingratitude!
Does it not call for a deeper study
of the warped Kashmiri psyche?

My Parental Home

We turn right along the S P College Lane,
famously called 'love lane'
that led to my parental home,
where I lived for twenty years,
the home which carries in its breast
a part of my life, the very best.

At the gate, Rauf asks me
if I would like to go in and see?
He does not know
that we have sold off the property already.

We had resisted the sale
for more than a decade
while it had turned into a caravanserai
where people came and went away,
some carrying off a heirloom,
others leaving a mess behind.

Before it was finally sold,
seven families, unknown to me,
and to each other unknown,
had made it their abode,
while a part of its beautiful lawn
had been sliced off by the neighbour
and merged with his own.

My fervent pleas and petitions
to the powers that be,
to secure and restore my estate,
had fallen on deaf ears.
It was then
that I was constrained
to sell it for a song
before the other neighbours too
eyed their share of slices
and swallowed all of it for free.

No, I have no heart to go in,
to see the desecration and ruin
of a dear home that nurtured me,
a home where I welcomed my bride
and raised a loving family.

I have no desire to meet the new owner
to ask how my home faired under his care.
I still smart under the guilt and shame
of abandoning her
for reasons whatever.

I heave a long and cold sigh,
and kiss this home a goodbye.

Ramchander Temple

On the left,
just opposite the gate of my home,
it is shocking to find
the vivisection of Ramchander Temple -
the front yard sliced off
and merged with the road,
exposing the temple to the traffic,
its sanctity violated,
and the sanctum laid bare
like a maiden stripped off her gear.

But, this is not the first time
that we have been forced
to sacrifice the symbols of our faith
for the common good,
and to buy peace
with the neighbourhood.

This was no inconsequential temple,
(no temple really can be)
but one of the most sanctified,
where we held festivals each year,
in Spring and in fall,
during the nine days of Ramanavami,
and picnicked in the sprawling lawns,
sharing sheerchai and telewaroos,
nadermunjas and pakoras.

Here, children played in the yard,
blowing conchs and wooden whistles,
flying gas balloons and kites,
while the elders prayed inside.

I have no heart to go in
and seek a darshan,
for I will have a lot to answer
to the deities inside
that we worshipped every day,
and a lot to hear from them.

Barbarshah

I ask Rauf to drive on,
soon to cross the Barbarshah bridge
across the dying Chunth kol
now like a faded green ribbon,
as duckweed hides the shame
of a once beautiful dame.

We turn left here
on to Nai Sarak,
where many boys offered arrest
during that historic agitation
when a Pandit girl, Parmeshwari,
escaped with a Muslim boy
and converted to Islam
to the mortification of her parents
and the whole Pandit community
who claimed she was a minor.

That, alas, was the turning point
from where there was no looking back,
as the State administration geared itself
to teach Pandits a lesson,
and, through discriminatory legislations,
punitive orders, and proclamations,
applied the squeeze,
forcing us
into a silent exodus
till the militants took over
and did the rest.

Habba Kadal

We turn right to Habba Kadal,
once the hub of Kashmiri Pandits,
their cultural center,
their identity,
their pride.

Alas, I do not find a single Pandit
in the two chowks on its two ends,
none crossing the bridge either,
or watching the river
on whose shores we grew up
and our culture thrived.

I recall how,
on mornings like this,
the place would be alive with people
and a bustling center of activity.

Early shoppers -
ladies with dejhours hanging from their ears
and bindis dotting their foreheads -
would haggle with the vegetables vendors
and flock near the dairy stores
for milk, yoghurt and fresh cheese.
Their men in turbans and pherons
would queue for hot loaves from bakers,
others asking the butchers for tender cuts,
and yet others shopping for Kangris,
and for readymade winter garments
from the hawkers on the pavements.

What presents now is a sad spectacle,
a rickety curvy cadaverous bridge,
empty streets and shuttered shops,
and spectral houses with busted gates
crying for their missing inmates.

A languorous vapor
covers the surface of the river,
as if to hide from view
the tragic story she wants to tell,
of blood and gore,
and of her shame.

O, where is the famous clinic
where Leela's father, Dr. Chogtu,
practiced medicine,
treating all his patients free,
lending a touch of his spirituality?
Where is the famous bookshop
of the flat-nosed Muka Mazeir,
where we traded old books for new,
year after year after year,
when we moved a grade higher?
Where is Taraq Halvai's tuck shop
where we snacked together
on his boiled-potatoes- in-yogurt special,
on our way back from school,
often cheating him
for a serving or two?

Kanya Kadal

We turn right and along,
and, just before the Kanya Kadal Bridge,
I see the portly milkmaid's shop
on the left of the road
in a deep-set corner
where it has been
ever since I remember.
She held her customers
in awe of her temper,
selling all mix of milk and water,
and second-grade adulterated cheese,
that still tasted better than elsewhere!

We cross the bridge over the Kiti Kol,
a flood diversion canal, like the Chunt Kol,
from the river uptown to the river downtown -
two of the several channels
dredged centuries ago
to save the main body of the city
from floods that often ravaged her.

The canals, like the Nalei Maer,
that gave the city a Venetian flavor
in days of our childhood,
are fast turning into drains and gutters,
and receptacles for the town's waste.

It makes me wonder
that while the Kashmiris are so zealous
about their right to self-administer,
how ruthlessly they are guiding the valley
on a mindless, self-destructive course
with their culture of greed and grab
that impels them on a ruthless spree
of filling up the water bodies,
nibbling at verdant lands and forests,
and knocking down the hillocks,
expropriating every inch of available space?

Pray, how is India to blame
for this State-sponsored vandalism,
this unabashed incest of paradise?

My Clinic at Chotta Bazar

On the left is Chotta Bazar
that always used to be
the hub of raging separatists,
Islamists and religious bigots,
who sought every opportunity
to create a ruckus
and disturb the fragile peace
between communities.

It was here I practiced medicine
for more than twenty years.
It was here I had to deal
with these rabble rousers
who looked for the flimsiest excuse
to hold you to ransom
for being what you were -
a Kashmiri Pandit ready to please.

They once held me hostage
because I couldn't examine a woman
who happened to walk in
just when I had closed the clinic
and was in a hurry
to attend to an emergency.

Angry mobs besieged me instantly,
charging me of being a Hindu chauvinist
who refused to examine a Muslim patient,
raising slogans that rent the air
against the whole Pandit community -
expletives I had never heard before,
abuse that one could barely stand.
They stoned my window panes;
they broke the windshield of my car;
they gheraoed me for a full hour
and would not let go
till the police arrived
and the inspector apologized on my behalf
to restore order.

That was how unruliness prevailed
in the better days of yore.
That was how cases were decided –
the victims asking for pardon
and the criminals walking free!
Now that the bashing boys
have been banished from here,
the fanatics and hate-mongers
will have to sort it out
amongst each other.

It is with a mixed feeling
I look at the windows of my clinic
that was seized soon after I left,
not unlike the mass taking over
of our leftover properties.

It is heart-wrenching to visit your home
that has been vandalized and ruined;
it is humiliating to enter a temple
that has been defiled and desecrated;
but it is a knock-out feeling
to find your workplace usurped.

For an unexplained reason,
a sense of renunciation fills my heart,
and I feel sorry for them
for tainting their hearts and hands
with the crime of snatching
others' bread and homestead.

I ask Rauf to drive on
via Karan Nagar to Chattabal,
and on to Safakadal, across the river,
where my younger sister ran a busy practice
till she left in that wave of mass exodus
with the rest of us.

She has wandered ever since
in a vain bid to resettle -
in Gurgaon, Delhi, Hyderabad -
agonizing over lost years of work,
pining for home that was burnt down
soon after she left.
Like my wife and me,
she was in the Medical College faculty,
giving her best to the community.

That, alas, is the story of all of us!

Eidgah

We drive from there to, what were,
the sprawling grounds of Eidgah,
where our rivals settled scores
for losing cricket matches against us
by physically beating us in return,
while we bravely fought back
even as we were vastly outnumbered.

Were match-fixing known then
we would never have considered
losing the contests to them
to escape the violence,
for we loved to win at all costs.

It is on the land here in Eidgah
that Tibetan refugees were settled
and assimilated in the cultural milieu
because they were Muslims
even as we, the indigenous people,
have been uprooted and cast away,
because we are not.

I often fail to understand,
how a religion that preaches compassion
can truly bind people of an alien stock
when its votaries strive to extirpate
people of the their own flock
because they belong to a different faith?

Vicharnag

We drive on to Vicharnag,
that famed religious center of Pandits
around which a whole culture thrived,
now lying abandoned and forlorn,
a wasteland,
a relic of its glorious past!

It was here,
by the side of this hallowed Spring,
seven kilometers from the city,
where scholars would spend a lifetime
to deliberate (vichar) and to study.

It was here
that the almanacs were written
year after year, that guided the everyday lives of people
throughout the calendar year.

It was here
that students came
from far and near
to learn in the company
of scholars, saints and seers.

It was here,
in the sprawling precincts,
under tall poplars and mighty Chinars
that devotees flocked to pay obeisance.

It was here
that the Kashmiri New Year
was ushered in every year
with great fanfare.

Now, there is not a soul around
when it should have been abuzz
with pilgrims and morning worshippers,
for it was here
that the terrorists struck first
and murdered the high priest,
way back in nineteen eighty eight.
Then there was no looking back.

Alas, this fount of knowledge,
this ancient seat of learning,
this epicenter of discourse,
is now like a blot in the landscape.

The spring, nearly 35 feet square,
that once sparkled with nectar
has turned into a cesspool -
dirty grey weed choking it within,
blobs of moss floating on top,
and stink rising from the surface,
threatening to suffocate.
Where a bath once did rejuvenate,
I dare not dip even my finger
lest it contaminate.

The carvings on the stones
that lined the spring -
sculptures of gods and goddesses -
are all smudged with pigment and moss.
The Badrapeeth in the middle
with Siva mounted in full splendor
is to be seen nowhere.
Have they taken a plunge in shame,
or satiated the thirst of an iconoclast?

The temple that housed our gods
has now become their tomb.
The dharamshala is a ghost house,
sans doors, sans windows, sans people -
a haunt for languorous pigeons,
now fluttering, now cooing,
and now making love,
oblivious of the desolation below.

A strange sense of nudity prevails here,
a shame that I desperately feel like hiding.
The sprawling lawn has turned into a bog,
with sewage seeping in from houses all around
that besiege the place in a viselike grip.
Soon, they may take the place over
and convert it into another khanakah
as they did centuries ago
with the abode of goddess Kali
on the right bank of the Vitasta.

Dear Vicharnag,
you, that once epitomized our scholarship
and culture,
now symbolize its death and decay!

Dear Vicharnag,
as I stand in front of you
taking the desolation in,
the solitary Chinar sheds its leaves
in the cheerless autumn breeze,
like tears from my eyes.
We both weep at your tragic demise.

As I stand here, stunned and speechless
and look at the ruins helplessly
for an answer to my query:
Is this the end of our culture,
of what we valued and held so dear,
Rauf looks at me in sympathy
and I motion to him
that it is time to move on
to a place that may help dispel
my somber mood.

Rauf's Home

Straight we drive to his new home,
his own, with a garden patch in front.

With what pride he leads me
into his two-storey cottage
to show me around -
the three bedrooms,
a traditional kitchen with modern gadgets,
a lobby that combines a dinning space,
a furnished room for his mother,
bathrooms, balconies, balustrades.

Were he alive,
his father would have been a proud man!

His well-groomed kids - a son and a daughter -
salaam me with great respect
and affectionately address me as Dadu.

To be addressed thus,
because I had been their Dadu's friend,
is flattering no doubt,
and a sobering thought
that the culture we once prided in
still survives somewhere
in this blighted land,
once hallowed by a long tradition
of spirituality and syncretism.

Sitting on the carpeted floor,
we breakfast on loaves of bread -
hot and fresh from the baker's oven,
buttered, peppered and salted.

O, how I relish the tea
from a traditional samovar
that I miss in exile
like so many simple joys
that came from living in Kashmir.

In an emotional parting,
Rauf's mother blesses me,
"May Kahnove protect you
and your family."

I avoid looking at her,
for I can not hide back a tear,
that I would not like someone to see
who looks up to me as her brother.

Rauf's Sister

It is to the house of Rauf's sister
that we now speed fast.

This is another emotional reunion
with a woman I had last blessed
when she was a lovely bride,
now graying at her temples
and a mother of two –
a son, gentle and respectful,
pursuing an MBA career,
and a daughter, graduating in Biotech,
pretty and demure,
with an outlook soundly secular.

They proudly show me their certificates
like they would to their own grandfather,
sharing with me their visions and goals,
their hopes about their future.

They are the other side of the story here,
of young men and women
who would like to go about their lives
unscathed by the militant creed.

Suddenly, I become sentimental:
"It is girls like you who make us proud,
who refused to be bludgeoned into submission,
who braved the acid attacks and abuse,
who dared the false purveyors of religion.
It is you that are the hope of this land;
it is on your promises that exiles like me
might be tempted back to the valley."
"Insha Allah," shouted the boy.
"Amen," muttered the girl.

Another tearful departure,
like from my own daughter.
"Come back," they call out,
when I settle in the car.
I do not look back at them;
just wave my hand
as we drive away.
How unbecoming it sounds
to betray the tide of tender emotion
to the younger generation.

Ganesha

We are soon at the Shahi Darwaza,
the main gate that leads you
within the wide boundary wall,
(famously known as the Kalai)
that was built long ago
in stone masonry and lime
around the Hari Parbat fort
and the vast stretches of land
that sloped down the foothills.

As children, we often walked the wall
(our own version of the Great Wall)
on our way to pay obeisance
to the pantheon of gods within the precincts,
or to play cricket, football and hockey
in the vast tracts of fallow land
that I find obliterated now
with mushroom human habitation.

A few leaps from the gate
is a nondescript structure
that merges with the hill,
the famous Ganesha Temple.

I have come for my salutations
to this elephant-headed god,
the fount of wisdom,
whom we always invoke
when we begin a day
or a new task.

This is the same Ganesha
where the devotees flocked every morning,
where bells never ceased to chime
and the sound of conchs
echoed from the craggy hill,
where the smell of incense wafted
to the blue sky above.

Inside the temple,
the pilgrims would jostle for space
to light a lamp, offer a flower,
and chant a hymn and a prayer.

Others who could not get in
vied with each other,
as they queued in the lane
outside the temple,
sticking their arms through the window,
pleading with the priests sitting inside
to tie a naerband on their wrists,
to daub their foreheads with vermilion,
and to pour a spoonful into their cupped hands
of the sacramental water
that they would gratefully quaff
and feel blessed.

Today, there is an eerie hush
and stark emptiness -
the temple bolted from inside
and not a soul anywhere around.
A police constable in mufti,
whom I mistake for the priest,
opens the door for me
and disappears quickly,
possibly, I think,
to get puja paraphernalia ready.

To savor each moment of the audience
and make up for lost years of idolatry
I enter the temple gingerly -
a low-ceilinged room
at the base of the Hari Parbat hill,
built around an irregular mound
flanking the northern slope.

Smeared with deep vermilion,
the mound of rock here
is naturally shaped
like the potbellied Ganesha
with an elephant head and a curled trunk,
who has evoked such adulation
down the ages.

But, now, the rock is defaced and laid bare,
the image tarnished beyond repair,
and dear Ganesha,
deserted by his devotees,
looking worn, forlorn and melancholy.

A lingum of Siva nearby
is parched and dry,
for there is none
to wash him with milk and water,
none to adorn him with a flower.

The windows of the room are shut,
shafts of light piercing through the chinks
create an eerie spectacle within.
Cobwebs weave gossamer patterns
in the crevices, cornices and corners
and mice scurry on the floors.
A bleak ceiling stares at you,
and a stifling silence
echoes from the bare walls.

The lamps are wickless and dry,
the bells have fallen silent,
there are no hymns to the gods,
and there are no flowers,
no frankincense.

I stand dumb and stupefied,
taking the desolation in,
melting with the shame
of having deserted my gods,
yet, posing a question in return:
Why did they prove gods of clay
and left their devotees no choice
but to leave everything behind
and run for their lives.

I open a window
to look outside at the lane
that led us to an undulating trail
round the Hari Parbat hill
along the foot hills
and through almond orchards,
to the temples of our pantheon of gods
that hallowed this land –
Haeri, Sharika and Sapt Rishi,
Devi Angan and Chakreshwar.
But, I do not find any trace of the lane
which has been assimilated into
a private backyard,
where a lady is sweeping a verandah.
She looks at me, all smiles,
and greets me with a namaskar,
inviting me come have a cup of tea.
I salaam her back gratefully,
shutting the window again.

Even the Hari Parbat hill
has been renamed Kohi Maran
by the powers that be
that are on a name changing spree.
That is how Shankaracharya hill
has been named Suleiman Teng,
and Anantnag of innumerable springs,
as Islamambad.
How artificial and unnatural
the new names sound to the ear,
like naming London as Jeddah
and Paris as Medinah!

As I begin to withdraw from here,
loathe to leave the gods alone
in that cold, closed chamber,
gathering the dust and moss of time,
and fading slowly into obscurity,
the man who opened the temple door
reappears, now in a police uniform,
and bolts the door behind me.
It is then that I realize he was no priest,
but a sentry on duty!

Makhdoom Sahib

We take a short drive to Kathi Darwaza
(the second big gate to the precincts),
from where a new flight of stairs,
that I had never seen before,
takes us to the imposing shrine
of the celebrated Makhdoom Sahib.

It is a lovely sight from the stairs.
On the right, the slopes uphill,
with dense new plantations,
look beautiful.
At the top, the fort is ever sublime,
its ramparts renovated in red lime.

The Afgani mosque in fading brown stone
sits on a plateau
at a lower level from the shrine,
and flanks the stairs on the left
overlooking the Malakhah,
the sprawling public cemetery
that would fill fear in everybody.

I am reminded of a childhood lore
about this public burial ground,
that ghosts with lights on their heads
beguiled wayfarers during nights,
and skeletons popped up from the graves
and robbed them of their belongings!

Rauf tells me
that the Afghani mosque is being restored
to its pristine glory.
He speaks of another mosque
inside the Hari Parbat fort
that people want rebuilt.

Well, I have not seen, I tell him,
nor heard of a mosque inside the fort
but just a small temple of Durga
where we used to worship
on every Nuareh and Baisaki,
when the fort was thrown open
for the general public.

"A mosque there has always been
that is almost extinct now,
partly from the ravages of time
and partly from the abuse of soldiers
camping inside the fort," he insists.
What of the temple, I ask?
Well, if there was one,
they should renovate that too,
he replies,
his tone consolatory!

I think with myself:
The legend of Hari Parbat hill
and the pantheon of Hindu gods on it
is interwoven with the Kashmiri Pandits,
the aborigines of Kashmir since eons.

The fort came much later,
built by the Afghan Duranis,
who would only have build a mosque
and the temple must have come after
when the Dogra Hindus took over.
No doubt, there is enough space
Both for a temple and a mosque,
but more importantly,
when will we rise above
the mosque and mandir controversy
that has created bad blood everywhere
and sullied the image of our country.

The shrine of Makhdoom Sahib,
the venerated Muslim saint,
is accessed through
two long flights of stairs,
from the north and the south.
It is a splendid two-storey structure
standing on several pillars
on the southern slope of the hill,
amid a large sprawling complex
of bathrooms, corridors, prayer halls,
and a huge courtyard
paved with chiseled stones.

When you come to think of it,
this shrine with a magnificent design
has come up right on top
of the unpretentious Ganesha,
the most revered of Hindu temples.
Is it all by sheer coincidence
that they built and superimposed
on our gods and deities -
be it during the despotic rule
of the fanatical Muslim kings,
be it during the secular democracy
that Kashmir is now supposed to be?

Helpless, we make do
with the replicas and clones
that we have built in our exile
of our temples and shrines.

We console ourselves
that in the context of our faith
the structures do not really matter,
for we see god everywhere -
in each individual
and in each living creature.
We see Him
as much in a mosque
as in our temples,
as much in this dargah
as in our hearts.
Even the dumb stones speak god to us
and we worship the earth and the oceans,
the trees, rivers and mountains,
the sun, stars and springs.

I find many believers here,
men, women and children,
praying, shedding tears, tying knots,
their faces lit up in faith.
But I fail to understand
how one faith can thrive
on the damnation of another;
how can love for one
nourish on hatred for the other?

There is nothing wrong
in any faith as such,
yet, it is often the faithful
who turn their faith into frenzy
and bring a bad name to it.

We climb down the northern stairs
to where they meet Ganesha again.
I see the same baker's shop
as when I was a little boy,
from where I would buy bagels
and feed the street mongrels
that never seemed to have their fill.
I see their progeny now,
tails wagging at me,
as if in recognition from bygone days.
They jump at the morsels I toss at them
that they catch in their mouths
with the same ease and finesse.
Verily, inconstancy is a human trait
whose loyalties change so often so fast,
while animals remain ever so steadfast.

In my childhood,
mother would thrust me
with loose change and a pocketful of rice
to give away in alms to the beggars
that lined the two sides of the street
from the main road to the Ganesha temple.
Thankfully, I see no beggars today;
they seem to have followed the devotees
to their exile all the way!

Pokhribal

Saddened by Ganesha's state
I have no heart to visit Chakreshwar
and the other temples around the hill
when the traditional access is denied,
the walkways assimilated by neighbours,
and the gods besieged and hemmed in.

Yet, I decide to visit Pokhribal
on the backwaters of the lake Dal,
a lovely spring and an old temple
we frequented in summer so often,
to drink of the water and enjoy a swim
during our teenage escapades.

We pass through a security check
and walk inside the sprawling estate
now turned into a fortification,
a sanctuary for an army contingent.

The people in towns and hamlets,
sore about Indian military presence,
have denied them space anywhere,
driving them into the last refuge –
the left-over properties of Pandits
and their temples and estates,
that have survived the terrorist deluge.

I enter the sanctum sanctorum
to find it dark, dingy and in disrepair,
the walls pasted with tattered pictures
of gods and goddesses on calendars,
the idols a picture of utter neglect.

The spring looks like a cesspool,
the water so murky and opaque
that you refuse to believe
it is the same nectar
that we drank tumbler after tumbler
and never seemed to have our fill.

The army personnel, for a change,
appear quite carefree and relaxed,
washing, showering, oiling themselves,
others enjoying a cup of tea,
and yet others lazing around,
their radios tuned to film songs.

It is not for me to grudge them
a break from their strenuous duties,
but, are they not rather negligent
of the gods inside Pokhribal?

With the army on guard, or without,
our temples and shrines, no doubt,
have run into a state of utter ruin,
the gods unattended and forgotten.

Who is worse off, I wonder -
the gods here sans their flock,
or the flock in exile sans their gods?

A Hurricane Drive

We drive out of Pokhribal
fast along Nauhatta and Jamai Masjid,
to Nalei Maer and Saraf Kadal,
to Bohri Kadal and Baba Demb -
my favourite haunts of yore,
that I can barely recognize now.

I feel sad about Baba Demb,
the once lovely lagoon
that has turned into a marsh.
It is disappearing fast, Rauf tells me,
into the greedy gullets of the guzzlers
of water-bodies
and the pot bellies of the poachers of land.
If they could, rues he,
they would even swallow the sky.

It is from Baba Demb
we would board a Donga
for school picnics to Nishat and Shalimar.
It is from here
we sailed to the tiny atoll
that housed the Bhairav of Mangleshwar.

Sadly, Mangleshwar too suffers
from utter neglect and ruin
like the other institutions and temples
of the exiled Pandits.
This quaint little islet
has turned into a swamp
and the Bhairav is deserted and sad,
a place of pilgrimage no more.

I ask Rauf to drive me on
to the most cherished place,
the place I think about so often
in my musings in exile -
my ancestral home in Rajveri Kadal.

Rajveri Kadal

Rajveri Kadal!
How sweet you sound to the ear;
what memories your name revives!

Rajveri Kadal!
I have carried you in my heart
ever since I sprang from you,
and played in your lap.

It all seems like yesterday!

Yet, when I am back
after nearly two decades,
I can barely recognize you,
for there is very little left here
except your name.
But who knows,
you too might receive a new name
in the rush to rename
places, institutions and landmarks,
and to rewrite the history of Kashmir?

There are no landmarks left
that would vouch for you
in the changed landscape
of this place.

Nalei Maer,
(the canal that cut through you
and gave you a distinct identity)
in which we fished and swam,
was filled up long back,
and the arched bridge of stone across it
lives only in memory.
How often we lazed on the brick parapet
listening to the gentle cadence of boats
in the water flowing by
and watching the swarms of crows
cutting across the sky,
as we discussed, debated and devised
our adventures for the next day.

Where is the mound in the square
that marked the grave of a forgotten fakir
where children often sat together
to draw inspiration from his folklore?

Where is the public tap outside my home,
that 24-hour fount of cool water
sweeter than I remember,
that grand confluence of the neighbourhood
where women washed, bathed and gossiped,
and there never was an argument?

Where are my loving neighbours -
the Gujris, Hajis, and Hajams;
the Khans, Mirs and Maulivis -
who pampered us quite a bit
because ours was a solitary Pandit home
in the whole Muslim neighbourhood?

Where are the cowherds and milkmaids,
the cap makers, the barbers,
and where the fishmongers
that drew swarms of shoppers
to make you so famous,
dear old Rajveri Kadal?

Neither do I find the chemist here,
nor the tobacconist, nor the butcher.
My father smoked no other tobacco
when we moved residence miles away,
nor bought mutton anywhere
except from the family butcher here.
The dhobi and the barber
from dear old Rajveri Kadal
came to offer their services
wherever we moved residence.
Such was the attachment with the place,
such was the bonding with people.

The maze of lanes that I knew
like the lines on my palm
and walked blindfolded upon,
are nowhere in evidence.
O, how they connected me
to people and places;
how often have I roamed them
in my imagination in exile!

O, where is our lawn with flower beds
that my father nurtured with passion?
Where is the vegetables farm
that we tended with great care?
Where is the sprawling backyard
in which the cowherds dumped dung
and spread it out to dry
in round flat loaves and dung cakes,
that served as ready fuel
for the hearth and the kangri.

It was there in that backyard
we played football and cricket
and held contests with rival teams?
I do not understand how and why
those friendly contests
between us and the neighbours
could have turned into deadly conquests
and swept us off our land
hurling us into exile.

O, where is the deep well
in our vegetable farm,
deeper than I ever remember,
from which we drew pails of water
for a cool bath in summer?

Remember, dear Rajveri Kadal,
when a cousin once fell into the well
and was pulled out unscathed,
by a valiant Muslim neighbour?
Far from demanding a service fee,
he was too humble and shy
even to accept our gratitude;
such was the fraternal spirit
that knit our communities.

Remember, how she giggled
(as if she had taken a pleasurable plunge)
when she found the whole neighborhood
praying for her with bated breath,
as the milkmaids beat their chests
and the children wept and wailed?

All I see of my ancestral house
that had braved the tides of time
for nearly a century,
and had birthed me
and five generations of my dynasty,
is a small mound of earth!

They have hacked you down,
my dear home -
nibbled at you,
taken you away, brick by brick,
and plank by plank,
stripped the papyrus and shingle off your roof,
gouged the doors and windows out,
dug out the plumbing,
pulled away the wiring,
and even scooped away the mud!

What a dream house you were,
beautifully architectured,
with a high plinth and a proud façade,
built with ancient Maharaji bricks,
khutamband ceilings and lattice windows,
and a second floor balcony
that stretched far out in space
like a wharf on the sea!

Can loot be ever so complete?
An earthquake, a flood, a bomb blast
leaves a wreck in its wake;
arson leaves behind its telltale signs
of ashes, cinders and debris;
but this here is total plunder,
a clean up procedure,
leaving behind not a trace of history.

All that remains is a mound of earth
like an unmarked, unsung grave.
Dust thou were, my dear home,
unto dust hast thou returned.

Is there someone watching,
and about to stop me,
as I scoop a clod of the dust
from where I have sprung -
to take it back with me
as the last relic of my past?

Gone with my first home
is also a larger part of me.
O, why did I undertake this journey
if it was only to carry back
the humiliation and hurt
of a golden period of my life?

My Elementary School

We drive three furlongs to Budger
to rediscover my primary school
where I learnt the three Rs
and picked my childhood friends –
more Muslims than Pandits.

In that age,
we were blissfully unaware
of separate identities,
there being nothing like 'them' and 'us',
and the teachers poured their soul
to impart the best of humanities.
The Maulvi taught Urdu and Arabic,
and the Panditji taught Sanskrit and Hindi;
the former was also the muezzin,
the latter also the temple priest,
and the morning azan from the mosque
and the chimes of bells from the temple
rang together in a soulful melody
of brotherhood and coexistence.

Alas, neither there is the school now,
nor the memory of those times!

Like my home,
the school is yet another casualty
to the frenzy of Azadi.
I am told,
it had to be burnt down,
for, education could wait
when Azadi was at stake,
and the boys had to weild the gun
in place of the pen.

As we drive to Ali Kadal nearby,
I draw another cold sigh
for I shudder to think
that a similar fate might have befallen
my Rangteng High.

Along the way
I try to recall and locate
the house of Ved Lal, my father's associate,
of Nilakanth Bazaz, his lifelong friend,
of Gopi Nath, his rummy playing mate,
of Bansilal, my classmate,
and of so many others –
friends, relatives, and neighbours.

I can't find anyone here
in the changed topography.
Some have passed away,
others have moved on,
yet others remain unknown
to the new generation -
the new breed that now lives
in what remains of those homes.

The new Ali Kadal Bridge
looks surprisingly alien,
and does not seem to connect.
The old was so familiar,
and imposing in its obsolescence!

The baker's shop in the corner,
from whom I would buy every morning
hot loaves of bread for the family
(so much mouth-watering were they
I would munch a couple on the way),
is nowhere in evidence.
No one knows where the baker fled
and whether he is living or dead.

Wherever you inquire,
the Kashmiri Pandits are spoken of
in past tense here -
they were,
they have been,
they had been.
Who were they, anyway,
they might ask, one day?

Karan Nagar

This predominantly Pandit mohalla
has got a complete makeover
since it was taken over
after they fled.
A quiet residential neighborhood
has morphed into a commercial center -
multi-rise buildings having come up
everywhere,
and a car bazaar is buzzing
where domestic peace prevailed earlier.

The arched gate of the Medical College
beckons me as before.
Should I or should I not enter
inside this dear institution
where I spent the best years of my life,
as a physician and teacher?

The impulse is stronger than reason
and I ask Rauf to drive in.
Students, doctors and nurses I see,
not one that I can place,
not a face that turns towards me,
for it is 18 years since I left
when most of them were kids
and some not even born.
My generation has moved on
and the new generation
does not even know my name.

I am no more than a non-entity
in a place that was like a second home,
where I worked for a quarter century;
a place that resonates inside me.

I hear the echo from that time
when chants of Jihad rent the air
and the medicos came out in processions
skipping lectures and ward rounds!
It was a strange frenzy
that had caught the imagination
of students, nurses and the faculty
who would skip their duty
for the mirage of Azadi.

A group of inspired students
came to my chamber one of those days,
soliciting my participation as a faculty member
in a protest march they had organized
to the local office of the U N Military Observers
Group.
I snubbed them for neglecting the patients
and trashing their studies
in favour of the politics of protests,
but lost quite some winks of sleep
for the possible consequences
at the hands of my own students!

I ask Rauf to turn back,
for, beyond fond memories,
this place holds no interest for me,
even as I spent my prime here
and endeavored to give my best
to my patients and students,
trying to impart the values of life
beyond the art of healing.

What place for values and ideals
where religious bigotry holds sway,
where divisions and discord prevail
over reason and rationality?

Lal Chowk

We drive out of the Medical College,
along the familiar Dewan Bagh road,
to the Shali Store and Exhibition Grounds
and up along the new flyover
to the famous Lal Chowk,
the Red Square of Srinagar
that has always been the Kurukheshtra
for the many agitations and uprisings,
a rallying place for the mass hysteria
that is stirred up from time to time.

Lal Chowk has once again
come to symbolize
the smoldering sickness
that consumes Kashmir
as the shadows loom large
of the proposed long march
on Monday, the 6th of October.

The separatists, who have given the call
for people to herd in Lal Chwok,
are an unenviable bunch of malcontents
who, every often, raise banners of revolt,
inflicting endless shutdowns and hartals,
bringing life in the valley to a grinding halt.

They are glib fundamentalists,
who thrive on the religious sentiments
of the gullible Kashmiri masses
and drive them like herds of sheep
into a self-destructive course,
flaunting wild dreams
of Nizame Mustafa and Azadi.

Pray, what is this Azadi all about
except a freedom from free thought,
from progress, from reason,
from tolerance, from syncretism?

An eerie hush has descended on Lal Chowk
like a prelude to a tragedy,
even as the shops are open,
and people go about their business;
no sign whatever
of the turbulence underneath.

Is it the lull before the storm?

There are a few bunkers in evidence,
and fewer soldiers at vantage positions,
their faces eager to befriend,
even as they are ready to defend.

Gagribal - Buchwar

On along the old Polo Grounds
to the foothills of Shankaracharya again
for a short stop at Gagribal
to buy a box of apples for the Wakhlus.

Why are apples here,
in this land of Delicious and Ambri,
more expensive, and almost double the price,
than in Jammu, I wonder.
The Kashmir trader was always notorious
for cheating and making a quick buck,
but the greed seems to have grown manifold
and the grab culture got a big boost
in spite of the ferment of religious piety!

That reminds me
that it was here at Gagribal
that the Income Tax officials
who had flown from New Delhi
to uncover the black money
of the big hoteliers and businessmen,
were humiliated, hounded and beaten up?
The papers, files and documents
that they had seized from the defaulters
were thrown in the lake Dal
by the crowds who were made to believe
that India was taxing the Kashmiris.

That was in more peaceful times,
before terrorism had raised its ugly head,
but ever since, the Central agencies,
be it of the Income Tax or the Sales Tax,
dare not even contemplate
raiding the defaulters in Kashmir.

For that matter,
during the worst years of militancy,
the people would not even bother
to pay the bills of electricity and water.

On to Buchwar, to Wakhlu's
who are waiting to host us lunch.
A single Pandit family for miles around,
they come to spend the summer here
under the long shadow of gun culture,
to escape the scorching Indian summer
that has scorched the soul of the exiles.

Over many pleasantries with this genial couple
(my younger daughter is married to their son)
we take a quick lunch and a cup of tea
when my brother phones from London,
eager to know how I fare
while on my visit here.

He has left the valley five decades earlier,
yet, London is only a surrogate home,
while his soul resides here.
He registers every event in the valley
with a far greater intensity
than those who live it directly.
Such is the longing for roots,
such is the pull of homeland!

I tell him what I feel like -
a stranger on home turf -
even as I reassure him
that I feel quite secure,
and that I will be inking my impressions
in a travel diary,
for all to see.

The Award Function

A magnificent institution,
the Sheri Kashmir Convention Center
is like another fading jewel
in the lap of the mountains
on the shores of the lake Dal.

Sprawling lawns merge with the lake
that reflects the mountains in a mirror image,
but deftly hides the new breed of wild
that infest the high ranges here –
displacing the rare species
of Hangul, black bear and tiger -
a wilder breed that wield the guns,
a breed whose writ still runs.
No surprise, therefore,
that the place is bustling with policemen,
and entry to the convention center
is only after a due identification.

The auditorium is grand,
the podium well decorated,
the gathering large
in spite of the fear in the air.

Shri N N Vohra, the Governor
arrives without much fanfare
and the ceremony begins soon after.

In his welcome address,
the Secretary rattles out a long wish list
for more favours for the Academy
and more funds from New Delhi..

A group song of welcome –
boys in kurtas and shalwars,
girls in white frocks and dupttas,
(surprisingly, all bare headed) –
sets the tone of the function.

One by one,
the awardees are invited to the stage,
their profile is read out
and the Governor felicitates them in turn
with a Shawl and a cheque,
a clock and a memento.

The awards over,
the Governor, in his address,
grants all the wishes of the secretary,
like the boons that a benevolent deity,
quick to please the suppliant,
bestows with, "So be it."

Yet, nothing ever seems to satiate
the insatiable Kashmiri appetite –
no boons, no grants,
no bonanzas, no freebies.

And nothing helps to bring them
closer to the Indian nation -
neither the high altitude rail link
nor the international airport,
neither the Koshur Channel nor Akash Vani,
neither the special status nor Article 370.

All her wealth might India shower
and bestow all her love and care,
the Kashmiri heart is elsewhere.
Alas, it is a one-way love affair!

I don't know the Governor personally,
but, his dignified bearing,
and the tone and tenor of his address
speak of a genuine person
who would like to pull Kashmir
out of the present impasse
after the Amarnath Yatra controversy -
the Kashmiris paranoid and unyielding,
the Jammuites rebellious and angry.
He took over as the Governor
just when the valley was on fire,
yet, he lost no time
to don the role of a firefighter.

I wish him luck in his endeavor
to quell the fires of discord
and win the people over.
That he stuck to the date and time
for this award function,
in the face of the raging storm,
speaks a lot about his determination.

Dinner with the Dhars

As the evening draws near,
we return to the Circuit house,
and Dr. Dhar arrives soon after
to pick me in his car.

I am visiting the Dhars first time in Srinagar
since his son and my daughter
tied the nuptial knot far away in Delhi
three months after the exodus.
Kashmir was out of bounds then
for a wedding celebration.

It is a veritable botanical garden
with the flora special to Kashmir
that they can boast of here.
The almond, the apricot, the walnut,
the apple, the cherry, the pear,
the willow, the pine and the Chinar,
and shrubs and plants - common and rare -
name it, and they are all here
in this place,
blessed by their presence.

Dr. Surendra Dhar,
and Vimla, his doctor spouse,
are rare specimens of human courage
who preferred to stay back in Kashmir
even after that 83-day ordeal
when he was kidnapped by the militants
and held hostage in far flung mountains
along the Symthen Pass,
and beyond.

His saga, chronicled in his work,
The Story of a Frozen River,
is a bold attempt to unravel
the contours of militancy here,
and to explore the psyche of the captors
and the mind of people in captivity.

The couple is holding it out
and manage to live on their terms
even when their kindred have fled.
They are loved and respected,
not just because they dared,
but because they reach out,
and give their best to the patients.

Can they become the role models?
Can they, along with the residual Pandits
(just a couple of thousands by the latest census),
be the inspiration for the exiles to return?

To drinks, dinner and discussion
on subjects serious and trivial,
all touching our daily lives,
all related to Kashmir –
the unpleasant past,
the uneasy present,
and the uncertain future.

Back to the Circuit House

Dr. Dhar drops me back
and I find a good gathering here
of other awardees and some visitors
enjoying an after-dinner chat.

A well groomed Pandit lady,
with an upright stance and a confident step,
(what is she doing here, I think to myself)
comes near and introduces herself
as one Ms Sumbly.
She is a Central Government official,
who often comes visiting here
to oversee various fast-track projects
about maternal health and child care.
Another is Rakesh Handoo,
of the Srinagar Door Dharshan,
who stuck to his post in the face of danger.
He asks if he could interview me
and telecast my impressions
about the award function.

One shudders to recall
how Pandit Lassa Kaul, the then Director,
was murdered in cold blood
when militancy was at its acme
in nineteen ninety.
He was killed like many others,
because he was what he was,
a true Indian and a Kashmir Pandit
who would not be dictated by the militants
to air their programs
that would help boost militancy.

These are the few Pandits who,
like the Dhar couple,
serve Kashmiris in so many ways,
and help to keep the last vestiges alive
of the many-hued culture of Kashmir
that is fast threatening to become insular.

They are the creaky bridges
that connect the two communities;
they are the last surviving links
between the Muslims and Pandits;
they are the last outpost
of the Indian ethos in Kashmir.

Can they be the inspiration for our return?

The Mindset

I get an answer to that question, soon after,
when I happen to chance upon in the gathering
a top *government functionary*
who rues that good doctors and teachers
have become scarce in Kashmir
after the Pandits 'fled'.

I was incensed by that word
for it is a common canard,
a myth perpetuated by people like him,
that the Pandits 'fled' Kashmir,
that they deserted their homes and hearths
for the unknown terrains of exile,
that they did not love their land
and ditched the struggle for Azadi,
that they were afflicted suddenly
with a strange wander lust;
because they were lured by Jagmohan.

"We need your services," he says
"doctors like you are hard to find.
You could fly here on the weekends
and examine any number of patients.
You can put up in a hotel or a hut;
we can arrange the very best."

"What use coming here," I ask,
"if it is to stay as a guest
and not in my own home,
and if it is not to return for good?
And what about all other Pandits
who did not flee of their own will
but were forced into exodus
like the rest of us?"

"Do they really want to return?" He asks.
"Do the Muslims want them back?" I ask.

He hesitates a while before he speaks,
"Yes, we want them back,
but, there will have to be a consensus
amongst different groups and factions,
for there can be no guarantee
against militants and fringe elements.
Even we don't feel safe,
yet, we did not choose to run away.
We braved the bullets from both sides
while you deserted mother Kashmir
and made it good wherever you went.
Besides, your many leaders give the impression
that you do not want to return."

I got my answer,
for, like others of his ilk,
he had betrayed his mindset
at the very outset
with his refrain that we had 'fled'
and ditched the Muslims
whom we left behind to face the bullet.
He did not have to make it clearer
that we were really not welcome,
that our return was conditional,
that they needed our services and not us,
that we could stay as guests
but not as rightful citizens.

Was there any fun
carrying on the discussion?
For, it is not the common man
but the *bureaucrat* and the manager,
the politician and the minister,
who do not want the Pandits back.
It is they who debate and legislate
and are in a hurry to confiscate
our institutions and estates
and not let us return to Kashmir.
It is they who are the worst offenders
of our human rights,
and not the common Kashmiri Muslims,
who, like Rauf, would want us back.

Militancy is but an extension,
of the no-holds-barred State terrorism
that has been unleashed upon us.

I got my answer
for, like others of his ilk
he had betrayed [illegible]
at the very outset [illegible]
with [illegible]
and ditched [illegible]
whom we [illegible]
He did not have to raise a doubt
that we were really not welcome
that our return was conditional,
that they needed our services and not us,
that we could stay as guests
but not as [illegible]

Was that any [illegible]
carrying on the [illegible]
That it is not the common [illegible]
but the [illegible]
the politician and the [illegible]
who do not want the Pandits back
It is they who [illegible]
and are in a hurry to [illegible]
our [illegible]
and [illegible]
It is they who are the [illegible]
of our [illegible]
and not the common [illegible]
who, like [illegible]

Militancy is but an outgrowth
of the [illegible]
that has been unleashed upon us.

Day Three

Sunday, 5 October 2008

Curfew

Another night in the guesthouse,
another night of wakefulness
as I collect my thoughts in the stillness
and wonder more and more:
Will Kashmir ever be like before?

Happily for me
the muezzin from across the river
jolts me out of depression
with another cascade of prayer.

I await the phone call from Dr. Dhar.
He has insisted that he will drive me
to Paree Mahal and Cheshma Shahi
as early at dawn as can be,
when fairies come dancing from the hills
and angels descend from the skies,
when the place is at its paradisiacal best
for a quiet rendezvous.

I pick the phone on the first ring,
my heart beating in anticipation.
"I am sorry,
curfew has been clamped in the valley.
The curse has fallen yet again here
and we can hardly go anywhere, "
laments Dr. Dhar,
his sonorous voice turned somber.

I am stunned for a while
even as I got the answer
to that recurring question
I was asking myself all night -
whether Kashmir could ever find
peace and harmony again.

Soon, I wake up to another *déjà vu*
of those days of endless curfews
before we were forced to take flight.
It was a part of life then;
it seems a part of life now.
Curfews, hartals and shut downs,
protest marches and demonstrations,
violence, killings and bomb blasts -
they will possibly remain for ever
embedded in the Kashmiri culture.

Nothing seems to have changed here
about the creed of violence and fear,
and yet everything has changed for us
after our unfortunate departure.
The valley has taken on
a distinctly Islamic flavor,
and the many-hued garden
is no longer there.

It is a chronic sickness that afflicts Kashmir,
a virulent virus of blind obedience to unreason
that proliferates in the tissues and organs
of the civil society,
causing an indolence of the spirit,
and a negativity that rules the mind.
I wonder if the Kashmiris know
what they really want
for, none has answered that question
straight or to my satisfaction.

And there is another conundrum
I have not been able to resolve -
is it really worthwhile coming back here?

I had reserved a part of the morning
to visit my friends and acquaintances,
though those who really mattered
are either dead or have fled,
or live out of the city.

I had to offer a belated condolence
on the demise, twelve years back.
of our family friend, Haji Abli Bhat.
Before he died of a stroke,
he had his burning wish fulfilled
to visit us in Jammu,
and to find out how we fared in exile.

I owed another condolence
to the adopted son of Biba Masi,
our worthy neighbour.
She was a barren old widow
who cleaned windows and mopped floors
and did odd jobs for others.
She was poor but proud,
and lived a life of piety,
but died cursing the militants
for forcing the Pandits into exile
and bringing ruin upon Kashmir.

I had also planned to visit Hafeeza,
a kindly woman from Ishabar,
that famous hamlet at the foot hills
where people found spiritual solace,
where the great Swami Lakshmanjoo
found enlightenment and bliss.
She came with a gift for my wife
of the first pick of cherries from her farm
as a token of her affection
year after year.

Since all these visits are cancelled,
how do I spend the whole morning
and part of the afternoon
till the flight out of Srinagar,
I wonder?

Why not switch back
to my erstwhile routine
and write a chronicle
of my 48-hour sojourn
since I landed here?

Writing seems the only recourse
to some peace in turbulence,
a catharsis for the pent up emotions,
a pick-me-up for the melancholy spirit,
a penance for our failings and follies,
an exorcism to drive evil spirits away
that have possessed the valley.

There was nothing inspirational
in this hurricane trip so far,
and my cherished visit to Paree Mahal,
that might have lifted my spirits,
was not to be.
Possibly, because it had always been
my most favorite haunt,
where I often hiked with my children
whom I would have missed so badly.
Possibly,
because the fairies of Paree Mahal
have also gone in hiding like the Hangul,
or been driven far away like the Pandits.
Possibly,
because I have to pine for and wait
for a propitious time to come here again.

For now, let the rabble rousers self-indulge again.
For now, let them have another field day.

Adieu

Life has come to a standstill
as the van takes us
along empty lanes and deserted streets,
passing by shuttered shops
and silent neighborhoods.

There are police pickets here and there,
outside State government buildings,
and on the two ends of the bridges
that we cross on way to the airport.
Other than that,
and except for a stray dog scratching lazily
under the shade of a tree,
Srinagar has turned into a ghost city.
Even the birds on the poles and power lines,
have sensed the mood and turned dumb,
and there is an airlessness in the atmosphere
that pervades everywhere.
If there are souls in the city
they are entombed inside the houses
for I do not even hear a whisper.

We stop at barricades manned by soldiers,
to display our identity cards and air tickets.

I am seized with deep melancholy
as I look through the windshield
trying to take in the last scenes
of the receding city.
I look at the helpless Vitasta
tracing the tragic course of history
as she seems to flow down hesitatingly.
I sweep a glance at the ring of mountains,
the silent sentinels of the valley,
and feel like being ferried into space
to the silence of an interstellar journey,
far away from fear and uncertainty
and yet, feeling the pangs of separation already.

Soon we reach Srinagar International
and I wonder about the billboard
that welcomes you to 'Paradise' on arrival.
There is no matching signpost of farewell,
but if there were one, it might rightly read,
"From Paradise turned into hell."

The Return Flight

('A man's homeland is wherever he prospers.
- Aristophanes)

Going through the formalities of the travel,
I am bereft of emotion, strangely so,
as on the day I started from Jammu.

As we take to wings,
the valley looks graceful
in her autumnal mantle -
familiar little hamlets coming to view
and vast stretches of fallow land,
that sets me thinking again:
There is no dearth of space here,
and we could be settled back
in these expanses
without encroaching on any one,
without disturbing the hamlets.
We could again be
back in our homeland,
and a part of the landscape,
again to live in peace and harmony.

But, if there is no place for you
in human hearts,
what use the space on land?

I see clouds speeding past the window
as we are hauled up in space,
obliterating the view of the valley,
breaking for a while my soliloquy
as I come to grips with the reality
of the utter unpredictability of the valley.

In Kashmir, even when it is bright and sunny,
and the sky blue, beautiful and bold,
there is always a menacing cloud
lurking behind those cliffs,
ready to burst
and bring devastation in its wake,
blow hamlets and towns away,
not just the peace and harmony
that I was thinking about.

Soon we cross the Pir Panjal
and what a contrast -
vibrant green fields of all shapes,
squares, rectangles, and circles;
river tributaries crisscrossing the land;
and flat rooftops kissing each other,
making a statement.

For once, my heart turns inside
with an exceptional fondness for this land
that hosted us full eighteen years
and made us feel so welcome,
so secure.
How come we never owned it
as it owned us?

As we touch the Jammu tarmac,
smiling faces greet me,
familiar people who know me by name,
whom I have begun to trust.
Suddenly, I get a feeling,
first time in these long years,
that I am returning home.

No, I am not a refugee;
this place belongs to me,
and I belong here.
A homeland for me
is a place
which gives me back my identity.

Notes

Azadi – Freedom

Bindi – A saffron/vermilion mark on the forehead

Chowk – Market square

Dargah – Shrine

Dejhours – Metallic (generally golden) ornaments, worn by married Pandit women

Delicious and Ambri – Two famous varieties of Kashmiri apples

Dupttas – Scarves

Hangul – A rare species of stag In Kashmir

Hartals – Shutdowns

Kahnove – the one with eleven names

Kangris – firepots

Kurtas and shalwars – Shirts and trousers

Mohalla – Neighborhood

Nadru – Lotus root

Nadermunjas and pakoras – Fried lotus root and potatoes

Naerband – Sacred thread tied round the wrist by Pandits

Nizame Mustafa – The Islamic dispensation

Pherons – Long robes

Sheerchai and telewaroos – Salt tea and bagels

Spring shikaras – Luxury boats with spring seats

Thokur kuth – Prayer room installed with a Siva lingam

Vaakh – Quatrain

An exile from Kashmir, the author is invited to Srinagar to receive an award. He goes there after eighteen years and stays just for two days. During that time he covers lot of ground, traveling to different places, catching up with the enormous changes that have taken place in the valley.

The narrative unfolds in short episodes as the author moves from one place to another, traveling back and forth in time from the days of his childhood, comparing what was with what is, and looking into the future for how it is going to be.

The travelogue is one of the first to bring the reader to know the truth beyond the rhetoric that has masked the real tragedy of ordinary Kashmiris, and describes candidly how the guiding principles of their lives - of unity in religious diversity - got a severe mauling and changed the identity of the people.

The narrative brings out the tragedy of the Kashmiri Pandits, who were driven into exodus of unparalleled magnitude in modern times. Two decades later, their institutions, their estates and their temples lie in shambles. Their gods are abandoned and forlorn, looking for the devotees who have fled in fear.

The author poses the query: What hope for a reconciliation and reconstruction of the devastated social and cultural edifice that was the hallmark of Kashmir?



Dr. Kundan Lal Chowdhury is a medical professional, poet and writer. He has three published anthologies, and was conferred the Best Book Award for Excellence in Literature by Jammu and Kashmir Cultural Academy for his work, The Enchanting World Infants. Besides poetry, he writes short fiction, essays, commentaries and book reviews. He has also written a series of true medical stories under the title My Medical Diary that encompass a period of four decades of his career as a practicing doctor.

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